



Miné Okubo

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In the camps, first at Tanforan and then at Topaz in Utah, I had the opportunity to study the human race from the cradle to the grave, and to see what happens to people when reduced to one status and one condition.

— Preface to the 1983 edition of *Citizen 13660*

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Quick Facts

- * 1912-2001
- * Japanese-American writer and artist
- * Arguably her most famous work is *Citizen 13660*

Biography

Miné Okubo was born on June 27, 1912, in Riverside, California, to Japanese immigrant parents. From an early age Okubo was interested in art, and her parents always encouraged her to develop her artistic talent. To refine her craft, Okubo attended Riverside Community College and, later, the University of California at Berkeley where she earned a Master of Fine Arts. In 1938, Okubo was the recipient of the Bertha Taussig Traveling Scholarship, which presented her with the once in a lifetime opportunity to travel to Europe and continue her development as an artist. However, due to the outbreak of World War II and her mother's illness, Okubo was forced to cut her stay in Europe short and return home. Upon her return, Okubo began working in the Federal Arts Program. She was commissioned by the United States Army to create mosaic and fresco murals. During her time with the Works Progress Administration, she worked under the Mexican muralist Diego Rivera in San Francisco -- literally. As Rivera was painting murals, Okubo was below, explaining his work to visitors. It was during this time that Okubo's mother passed away.

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Biography continued

On December 7, 1941, the Japanese government bombed Pearl Harbor, an event that would forever alter Okubo's life as well as the lives of 110,000 other Americans of Japanese descent. On April 24, 1942, she was forced to relocate to the Japanese internment camp of Tanforan. Here, Okubo produced countless paintings and drawings that documented the life of the Japanese internees. In 1944, with World War II coming to a close, the editors of *Fortune* relocated Okubo to New York City where she worked as an illustrator for the magazine. In 1946, Okubo published a collection of her paintings, drawings and sketches done during her time in Tanforan, and later at the Topaz Japanese-American Internment Camp.

The dramatic, detailed artistry and brief text depict life in the camps, recording Okubo's observations and experiences. Her pen and ink drawings document daily life, and each picture is accompanied by captions that thoroughly explain each scene. Inside of these camps, cameras were not allowed, which makes Okubo's artwork even more valuable. *Citizen 13660* helped give voice to the tragic and shameful internment of the Japanese American community, propelling this disgraceful act onto the center of the American social stage.

There are 206 drawings with text in *Citizen 13660*, bringing the harsh realities of internment to life. Okubo gives insight into how the people created a community by organizing schools for their children, publishing a camp newspaper, and seeking creative ways to pass the time. Her account of these activities is vivid and at times humorous.

Since its original publication, *Citizen 13660* has been reprinted many times. Columbia University Press first published it in 1946, just one year after World War II ended. Many critics at the time considered it to be a very significant record of the internment of Japanese Americans. American novelist Pearl S. Buck said that, "[Miné Okubo] took her months of life in the concentration camp and made it the material for this amusing, heart-breaking book . . . The moral is never expressed, but the wry pictures and the scanty words make the reader laugh -- and if he is an American too -- sometimes blush." *The New York Times Book Review* called *Citizen 13660*, "A remarkably objective and vivid and even humorous account . . . In dramatic and detailed drawings and brief text, she documents the whole episode -- all that she saw, objectively, yet with a warmth of understanding." Because interest dwindled as years passed, *Citizen 13660* and other works about internment became less important to the American public, including to Japanese Americans. As Okubo herself wrote, "The war was forgotten in the fifties. People throughout the country were busy rebuilding their lives."



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Biography continued

As many third generation Japanese Americans had been very young, or not yet born during the internment, they first found it hard to grasp its importance. When many of them started attending college in the late 1960s and early 1970s, they began to understand the terrible injustice that had happened to their parents and grandparents. They organized and demanded that people again discuss the internment, and that the government give reparations to those who were affected by it. It was this issue that brought about the second publication of *Citizen 13660* in 1973. This reprinting introduced the book to many new readers who not only had never heard of it, but also had never even heard of the internment of Japanese Americans. The University of Washington Press reprinted the book again in 1983, after the United States government began considering the effects of the internment on Japanese Americans; this edition included a new preface written by Okubo.

There have been many works published regarding Japanese internment since *Citizen 13660*, including collections of photographs, autobiographies, historical accounts, and children's books. But one of the most distinctive aspects of Okubo's memoir is that it crosses genres. Like photographs, Okubo's drawings serve as visual aids to the story, yet with more expression and depth than photographs could produce. As Okubo writes her autobiography in the book, she also writes the history of the internment. Readers could also consider *Citizen 13660* to be a children's book because of its simple drawings and frankly written text. The main characteristic of the book that sets it apart from other internment literature is its ability to transcend genres with its honesty, simplicity, and creativity. Any literature course that studies the internment of Japanese Americans should include *Citizen 13660* in its syllabus.

After publishing *Citizen 13660*, Okubo continued to create numerous artistic works and serve as an important voice for the Japanese American community. New York City remained her home until her death at the age of 88 on February 10, 2001. She leaves behind an immense catalog of work and an illustrious legacy that is increasingly coming recognized by the art world.



Miné Okubo

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